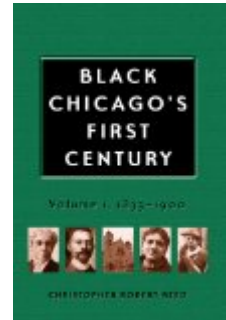


**Christopher Robert Reed.** *Black Chicago's First Century, Volume I: 1833-1900.*  
Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005. x + 600 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN  
978-0-8262-1570-3.



**Reviewed by** Lionel Kimble

**Published on** H-Urban (August, 2007)

In 1945, St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton published the groundbreaking study on African American life in Chicago, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. In their book, Drake and Cayton explored a number of issues regarding life on Chicago's black South Side including class and community formation; trends in black business and employment; the role African American institutions played in community organizing; and how the Great Migration changed black culture and politics. The method they employed in the preparation of *Black Metropolis* grew out of the Chicago school of sociological inquiry developed by scholars associated with the department of sociology at the University of Chicago and popularized by such scholars as Robert Park, E. Franklin Frazier, Louis Wirth, and Ernest Burgess. The research that grew out of their work introduced a new intellectual paradigm that focused heavily on Chicago. Together, these scholars' work became the canon of urban studies and, as a result, subsequent works like *Black Metropolis* and later, Allan Spear's *Black Chicago: Making of a Ghetto, 1890-1920* (1967), developed almost biblical reputations among

scholars of black life in Chicago, setting the stage for similar studies on other locales. The flaw in Cayton and Drake's brilliant study was that one could easily lose track of individual historical actors: none is identified by name and the work relies so heavily on empirical and statistical data to illuminate the diverse black community of Bronzeville that the "people" discussed remain invisible and their personal experiences abstract. Thus, as readers moved through the work, they never truly get a sense of what black Chicago looked like, how the residents experienced the sights, smells, and culture of the city.

With the publication of *Black Chicago's First Century*, Christopher Robert Reed skillfully addresses this flaw and draws upon federal pension records of Civil War soldiers, photos, manuscripts, newspapers, and secondary sources to uncover the stories of a number of individuals, many of whom, although not well known to casual observers, played seminal roles in shaping Bronzeville. Reed's stated objective, to provide a much-needed glimpse into the history of the earliest phases of African American life in Chicago, is

more than accomplished, and what follows in the 477-page work is no less than a who's who of known and not-so-well known business leaders, clergymen, club members, criminals, ordinary people, veterans, and politicians who moved to and lived in Chicago in the years following the departure in 1800 of Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable, a man of African descent who is acknowledged as Chicago's first permanent resident.

Reed's book, designed as a multi-volume set, is arranged both chronologically and thematically. As the book progresses, Reed explores such topics as Chicago as a frontier town; the Civil War's impact on community formation; demographic shifts following the Chicago Fire; the Gilded Age; and black Chicago and the 1893 World's Fair. Within each of these chapters, Reed presents an insightful narrative that focuses on aspects of demography, culture, religion, employment, and class. By focusing on these categories across time, readers are able to witness how racial dynamics changed in relationship to not only local events, like the 1871 Chicago fire and the subsequent 1874 "black Chicago" fire which destroyed much of the early black community (and caused it to move closer to its current location), but also were affected by national events like the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law, the Civil War, and the 1893 Columbian Exposition. By examining how larger events impacted local concerns, Reed is able to demonstrate that African Americans developed effective strategies to deal with the changing political and social landscape and used these issues to define what it meant to be a black Chicagoan.

Reed is able to maintain a cohesive narrative throughout the work by placing several people and organizations at the center of the larger stories. Two such examples are John Jones, a successful black businessman who developed into a community leader and eventually a Civil War recruiter and politician, and Quinn Chapel A.M.E. Church, one of the most influential and oldest congregations in the city that also played a role as

a stop on the Underground Railroad. This proves to be an effective tool because at times there is so much occurring politically and socially that readers may get lost in the details.

Another interesting aspect of *Black Chicago's First Century* is how Reed addresses emerging class distinctions. In the early stages of Bronzeville's growth, there were two competing groups at work--those living in Chicago before World War I and new migrants. Membership in each group was largely dictated by when one came to reside in Chicago and the belief that "old" migrants embodied a more respectable and more "authentic" black Chicago when compared to newcomers--who were primarily from the South--and their perceived backward, rural ways and mannerisms. Reed discusses an era where these class cleavages were not only less pronounced but moves past such a simple formulation and provides a more complicated analysis of class by exploring the lives of "the respectable," "the refined," and "the riffraff."

For Reed, the "respectable" people were ordinary, church-minded people who worked as civil servants, business owners, and service workers, and comprised the majority of the black community. The "refined" group included the small number of black elite and professionals in the city. Reed argues that among them "skin color, personal decorum, occupation, and professional pursuits held prominence among desired characteristics" (p. 275). By comparison, the "riffraff" occupied the criminal underworld of the infamous vice district known as the "Levee." Here readers encounter such colorful characters as criminal Dan Webster, who not only held some authority in the underworld but also operated a pig feet store as a legitimate business venture, and brothel madams Didie Briggs, Big Maude, and "Black Susan" Winslow (who reportedly weighed 449 pounds). Undoubtedly there would have been some class conflicts among these groups, especially as segregation forced these groups into closer proximity to each

other. Readers see that each of these seemingly disparate groups played a critical role in shaping the South Side community popularized by the Chicago school.

I was disappointed that Reed did not devote some much-needed attention to Chicago's West Side African American community. He briefly alludes to this community in this first volume, but never returns to the topic. Further exploration of this area, even though it was extremely small, would do much to remove the South Side bias so prevalent in the literature in black Chicago studies. This would strengthen an already powerful book, as current works on black Chicago focus almost exclusively on Bronzeville, with perhaps a notable exception being Amanda Seligman's 2005 work, *Block By Block*. I, for one, look forward to seeing if the West Side receives needed treatment in volume 2.

In sum, *Black Chicago's First Century* is an invaluable contribution to the field. It provides much clearer insight into the prehistory of black Chicago and resurrects the stories of people and institutions that laid the foundation on which current African American Chicagoans reside and work. More an encyclopedia than a textbook, Reed's book will no doubt challenge all of us to rethink what we know about the early days of black life in a northern city.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

**Citation:** Lionel Kimble. Review of Reed, Christopher Robert. *Black Chicago's First Century, Volume I: 1833-1900*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. August, 2007.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13497>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.